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ABSTRACT

Media sociology in the early 1980s was "rediscovered" by sociologists and political scientists. It was a discipline whose time had arrived. In much of the work in the field at this time the level of analysis dealt with individuals working within organizations. Since that time, media sociology has gone through paradigm debates, expanded theoretical horizons, and begun to hike levels of analysis higher than the individual-and-organization level. Where should media sociology be going? It will proceed best by systematic investigation of the organizational-institutional nexus, and it can do so by turning to studies of the audience. Media sociology should emphasize the socio-cultural dynamics of the process by which the media attempt to create, maintain--and profit from--their connections to audience. Its goal should be to explore the theoretical linkages between industrial or institutional studies of the media and cultural studies which now constitute a central focus of communication research. Specifically, this means 3 areas of inquiry: (1) critical reviews of where the field is and what is known; (2) images of audience at the organizational-institutional level; and (3) examinations of audience technology. (Twenty-eight references are attached.) (SR)

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RAISING THE LEVEL OF ANALYSIS IN MEDIA-AUDIENCE STUDIES

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Ten years ago we were editing a media sociology collection published in 1982 with the title Individuals in Mass Media Organizations (Ettema & Whitney, 1982). Our strategy at the time was to bring together what we saw as good recent work on the practices of mass media communicators. If nothing else, the book's title is a good representation of its contents and, with the benefit of hindsight, a fair representation of where "good recent work" in media sociology[1] was at the time. Although about half the chapters were written by sociologists and half by persons trained in mass communication/media studies[2], almost all focused on the individual-organizational nexus. As we put it at the time (Ettema & Whitney, 1982: 7):

> The symbols of contemporary culture are more than anything else the products of complex organizations. To understand these symbols, it is necessary to understand among other things the organizations producing them.
>
> ...[All the chapters] are about the same thing: the way symbol-producing organizations shape the form, content and meaning of their products. All recognize that individual communicators work within the context of organizational structures and processes.

Some months ago, we decided that it was time to "update" the 1982 volume with a 1992 successor, which made us think about where media sociology was at the time, where it has been since, and where it ought to be going.

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[1] By *media sociology* we mean sociology of media creation and production, not the whole of media studies, the latter encompassing not only media production but also the reception and impacts of media.

[2] Full disclosure: Six of the first authors were trained as sociologists, six in media studies, one in literature.

Where We Were:

The year 1980, as we were thinking about the earlier volume, was in some respects a high-water mark for media sociology. A handful of books appeared about that time by sociologists signaling a degree of interest in the media in that discipline that have influenced and animated media sociology ever since: Gaye Tuchman's Making News (1978); Herb Gans's Deciding What's News (1979); and Todd Gitlin's The Whole World is Watching (1980). Political science likewise was "rediscovering" media sociology at about the same time: As we were editing, Tom Patterson's The Mass Media Election (1980), David Paletz and Bob Entman's Media Power Politics (1981) and Steve Hess's The Washington Reporters (1981) were published, and Lang & Lang's The Battle for Public Opinion (1983) and Robinson & Sheehan's Over the Wire and on TV (1983) appeared shortly thereafter.

In short, as we were editing, we were aware of a sense of quickening pace and urgency about the area and gratified by the legitimation that the "rediscovery" of media sociology by the two more established disciplines provided. This was a field whose time had arrived. Moreover, in much of this work, the level of analysis--individuals working within organizations--was the same as which the scholars contributing to the volume also were working.[3]

In an important sense, however, the "rediscovery" of mass media in sociology, political science and the "new" social sciences which take their lead from them was less a rediscovery than a repositioning: Communication research, sociology and political science share one important common

[3] Not all these books operate exclusively at the individual-organizational nexus, but Gitlin (1980) is perhaps the only work cited which does not spend considerable time there.

ancestor, Paul Lazarsfeld. Our received history basically says that in the 1970s and 1980s the "limited effects" model we inherited from him, through Personal Influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and his student Klapper's Effects of Mass Communication (1960), is overturned in favor of notions of more powerful effects. And this makes the question of how media are produced more urgent, and more interesting. Whitney (1990) has argued elsewhere that the Vietnam war and Watergate were critical events for sociologists and political scientists, respectively, in abandoning "limited effects" models; in communications research proper, not only the writing in these disciplines but the theoretical arguments advanced by these scholars and critical scholarship in general helped this along.

Where Media Sociology Has Been Since:

To put where media sociology has come in the past ten years in perspective, we need to rethink briefly where the wider field of mass communication research has been in the past decade. In brief, it has broadened out theoretically and methodologically: the "paradigm dialogues" of the 1980s (see, e.g., Gerbner, 1983; Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe & Wartella, 1989) called attention to the differences between the "dominant paradigm" and challenges to it by largely but not exclusively European critical and cultural studies. The paradigm debate, further, brings into focus the two key issues we think that media sociology should be continuing to address in the near future--a focus on the audience and a concern with levels of analysis higher than the individual-and-organization.

Within media sociology itself, the 1980s saw a prodigious amount of publication and expansion of the theoretical frame in ways quite compatible with that of the wider field--in other words, critical and cultural theories

were taken up by media sociologists, both within media studies and in sociology. It is not necessary to review the range of publication of the 1980s here, but we must note that the range of work expanded apace. Theoretically, work ranged from a continuation of the familiar gatekeeper studies and an expansion of the agenda-setting metaphor to begin asking how the media agenda itself gets set to efforts to apply French postmodernism to media sociology. Happily, too, the site of research broadened from a near-exclusive concern with "traditional" mass media (as late as the 1970s, most media sociology focused on news and information and not entertainment and much of it on newspapers; what little did not concern newspapers studied television) to a wider field--advertising, radio, popular music, books, public relations, film, the ratings industry.

Where Media Sociology Should Be Going:

If the first half of the 1980s was a time when we engaged in paradigm wars, expanded theoretical horizons and began to hike our level of analysis up a notch, where next?

We might note at least in passing that concern with "level of analysis" is one that media sociology can be credited with bringing to attention to the larger field of communication research: Paul Hirsch's 1977 essay was an important "early" one in the area, and Dimmick and Coit (1982) and Whitney (1982) also argued for the importance of concern with level both in organizing disparate research findings and in generating new research. The influence these arguments have had may be seen in the attention to "levels" concern by its use as an organizing concept in a recent major handbook for the wider field (Berger & Chaffee, 1987) and devotion of a theme issue of a

current Communication Research to its theoretical application (Price, Ritchie & Eulau, 1991); see also Paisley, 1984.

And the reason that raising the level of analysis above the individual-in-the-organization happens is that the social theory urged on us in the paradigm debates demands it. This is, of course, not altogether new: Hirsch in 1977, for example, called attention to a wide variety of institutional and societal-level communicator studies. And in the continuation of the quotation from the 1982 edited collection that opens this paper, we had noted (Ettema & Whitney, 1982: 7):

> These structures and processes in turn operate within the contexts of the economic, legal, ideological and other institutional arrangements of society.

Moreover, the paradigm debates of the 1980s forced attention to the nature of the media audience. While the critical and cultural schools might criticize the "dominant paradigm" for inattention to the context in which mass communications were sent and received and the context in which communication research itself proceeded, "mainstream" social science research could, and did, retort that most critical and cultural study had little evidence that audience "readings" were as they were asserted to be, a challenge that cultural and cultural studies began to take seriously in the last half of the 1980s (see, e.g., Fejes, 1985; Grossberg, 1987; Allor, 1988 [and critical commentary following the Allor article]; Grossberg, Wartella & Hay, forthcoming).

This lengthy digression is by way of saying two things: Media sociology at this point will proceed best by systematic investigation of the organizational-institutional nexus, and it can do so--as the other papers here today argue, by itself turning to studies of the audience.

Now "audience" may seem a strange construct in media sociology, since we earlier defined the reception of media content out of its domain. We, however, are looking at it as a second-order construct, as the influence of the audience on communicators. Turning attention to the audience in this direction, too, is not new; many prior studies have addressed the question of the effects of the audience on communicators. But when we join our two concerns of level-of-analysis and communicators' audiences, an interesting thing happens: At the individual level of analysis, one may see "strong effects" of the audience, an argument Pool and Shulman (1959) made 32 years ago and Aristotle made 2300 years ago. At the organizational level, however, both theoretically (Darnton, 1975; Gans, 1985) and empirically (Gans, 1979; Atkin, Burgoon & Burgoon 1983), the audience disappears. Mass media communicators do not "know" their audiences and care remarkably little about them. What they create and produce is far more the products of professional routines, the editorial intrusions of supervisors within the organization and the judgments of peers both within and without. However, at the institutional and societal levels, the audience reappears, and with a vengeance.

No concept in media sociology has been more theoretically malleable than that of "audience." Indeed, each major theoretical stance within the field seems to emphasize its own particular view of what "audience" means. Political theorists with a pluralist bent, for example, may see the audience as the contemporary surrogate for "the public," while those political theorists who have taken a critical turn may see the audience as an oppressed mass that is either completely depoliticized by mass-mediated hegemony or else struggles to create oppositional interpretations of media content. Some

theorists of the postmodern see the audience as exacting revenge upon the social order by refusal of all meaning while others see it as desperately searching for meaning in a culture of consumption. Effects researchers may see the audience as the beneficiary of the media's tremendous information gathering and dissemination capacity or else as victim of the media's distorted portrayals of social reality. Neoclassical media economists may see the audience as the "sovereign consumer" in the media marketplace. Similarly, market research analysts may see the audience as decisionmakers--whether rational or irrational--operating in multi-channel environments. Marxian political economists on the other hand, may see the audience as itself the commodity to be traded.

These visions of the audience exhibit a number of similarities that cut across the traditional theoretical differences. Some critical researchers may join administrative researchers to characterize the audience as <u>subject</u>--as autonomous agent that acts to find or create meaning. Others, both critical and administrative, characterize the audience as <u>object</u>--as victim that does not act but is acted upon and thus suffers the imposition, or else destruction, of meaning. But if anything unites all of these views of the audience, it is the idea that the audience exists only in some sort of <u>relationship</u> to the mass media industry system. The notions of audience-as-market, audience-as-public, audience-as-victim and so on are all roles within a socio-cultural process of mass communication. Economists, for example, may define the audience as nothing more than the demand function within the media market but even the most audience-centric of perspectives, effects research, implicitly locates the psychological processes of individual audience members within a particular relationship to the media industry system. Thus, for

example, the effects of campaign coverage on audience-as-public has been studied under the rubric of research on the role of the media in the democratic process and the effects of televised violence on children's behavior has been studied to determine if government intervention is necessary to protect audience-as-victim.

Thus, for the future, we argue for an an examination of this relationship between media and audience from a point of view that might be described as industry-centric rather than audience-centric. This does not mean, of course, we argue for uncritical examination of the media industry system. Rather, we should be looking for the ways in which the industry (as opposed to the audience) attempts to make and manage the industry-audience relationship, emphasizing, in other words, institutional structures and practices. In the move to this higher level of analysis, we think it is necessary both to incorporate but also to move beyond the so-called "production of culture perspective" with its emphasis on stable organizational routines and generic conventions. At this higher level of analysis the audience is seen to be a product of something like a manufacturing process but it is also seen to be the site of political, economic and cultural contestation among media firms, advertisers, interest groups, government and other agents of power. Media sociology, then, should emphasize the socio-cultural dynamics of the process by which the media attempt to create, maintain--and profit from--their connections to audiences. Its goal should be to explore the theoretical linkages between industrial or institutional studies of the media and cultural studies which now constitute a central focus of communication research.

To be more specific, we see three principal areas of inquiry:

First is critical reviews of where we are and what we know: despite an enormous amount of work in the past decade, there still has not been a great deal of synthesis: communicator studies still tend to represent a single theoretical orientation, and the need for synthesis is critical. Of special interest here should be an exploration of what this "level of analysis" really is: Is what we are after comprised in what Dimmick and Coit (1982) call the "industry system" level (i.e., media industries), or do we have differentiable levels above and/or below that level that merit attention?

Second, as noted, we already have a literature on communicators' images of audience, we need to build from it, but at the organizational-institutional level. Communicators of all sorts are often exhorted to 'know their audience' but studies of professional mass communicators typically suggest that they hold very little information about their audiences. This does not mean, however, that images of the audience play no role in the production and dissemination of media content. Images or models of the audience need not reside only in the heads of individuals; they may reside in the goals and practices of institutions. James Webster will speak this afternoon about various images of audience that pervade and contend within the regulatory process. This is a study in what might be called the politics of audience. Marsha Siefert takes up the role of "high culture" in the late 19th Century and talks about how the music industries--through live and mediated performances, advertising and education--attempted to use the tension between mass availability and social distinction to develop new audiences for opera and classical music in America. Overall, we suggest, images of the audience at the institutional level can tell us much about organizational practice.

A third very promising terrain is in the examination of "Technologies of Audience." Individual communicators may indeed not "know" their audience, but the complexity and financial risk of modern mass communication demands that some image be in place, if for no other reason than to be able to forecast, to predict. An examination of audience technology, further, is an examination of the social and cultural consequences of measurement technologies by which audiences are quantified - indeed, commodified. In his paper today, for example, Peter Miller explores how commercial measurement services create audience "pictures" in the course of negotiation with client constituencies and in response to competitive pressure and changes in media and measurement technology. Anticipating future developments in the measurement business, Miller explains why some audience portraits become standard and why others are never created. And Beth Barnes looks particularly at the magazine and television industries to show how the evolution in their research methods, allows for ever-finer discrimination of audience segments. This has fundamentally reshaped the structure and content of these industries.

While we do not argue that <u>all</u> media sociology should revolve around questions of the audience, we think that work in the near future can exploit this relationship to the advantage of us all.

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